

## **The Last Day of Vamadeva**

*A Short Story by* **MASTI VENKATESA IYENGER**

**W**ORD went round all the ashramas that the great sage Vamadeva Dwaipayana Aruneya would that day complete his life of a hundred years. And people came to his ashrama, some from devotion, some from curiosity, some from jealousy, to have a glimpse of the sage, to see how a ripe old man would spend that day, and to test whether he was such a tapasvi as to cast his body aside at will. They came in twos and fours, or by themselves, choosing their own time.

Most people believed that Vamadeva was a great knower, a great Karmayogi and a great seer. But he had never opened his mouth to speak even a few words; he never preached.

Born in the Aruneya line, he had had his initiation into truth from his father at an early age, and in his own day earned a name as a man who knew much. When his discipleship drew to a close, he did not marry. With his father's death he should have taken over the conduct of the ashrama, but did not. Making over the affairs of the ashrama to his younger brother, who had sought the way of the householder, he devoted himself to tapas.

And this tapas for the large part took the form of supervising the work of the ashrama, of preparing the place where his brother the Kulapati held discourse and of looking after the welfare of all those who lived in the ashrama—people, cattle, birds and beasts. He woke up earlier than the others at dawn

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and went to rest at night long after the others had retired and thus moved the wheel of his labours.

After many such years, one day he went to his brother the Kulapati and told him that he felt like visiting the ashrama of Vasishtha. The Kulapati thought it would be wise to send two younger men with him. But Vamadeva would not hear of it.

"Will they look after me or would I have to look after them? I need no attendants. I shall go alone," he said, and went his way.

How long he stayed in Vasishtha's ashrama and what places he visited during his wanderings, nobody knew. But some twelve ears later he returned to his brother's hermitage.

Those who saw him on the day he returned clearly remembered how he looked; it was a face always full of radiance, but that day it had the glory of the noonday sun. The rishi resumed the routine he had interrupted twelve years earlier: he attended the young and the old as before; he caressed the cows and the cattle and watered the trees and creepers as before. He continued his ministration to the world.

Many years passed and his brother the Kulapati ended his sojourn on this earth. Some then thought that Vamadeva would himself assume charge of the ashrama. But Vamadeva persuaded his brother's son to become Kulapati. He was with his nephew for a year and fulfilled his ashrama duties; then he built a hut for himself under a banyan in a forest nearby. He got his nephew's consent and moved there.

Even this was an old tale, and not many recollected it. There were few who had seen the sage's brother; and fewer still, hardly two or three, who had seen his father. And there was none at all who had seen the sage at his birth.

His was a strange life. He had only two companions in his own small ashrama. They could not be called disciples; for the sage had not preached them a single word on any day. Nor could they be called his attendants for the sage laboured with them shoulder to shoulder. Probably the only tasks that they did, which he did not, were smaller details of some personal service

to wandering mendicants who spent a day or two in the ashrama. At other times they acted as guides to people who sought to go to neighbouring places. It may be that he did not do these things for the simple reason that the visitors would not let him.

People said that when first he set up his ashrama the ground was dense jungle and that the rishi had cleared it all and brought it to the present shape. It now had the appearance of a garden celestial. And all around the great banyan tree of uncounted age had grown numerous smaller trees in rows. Some bore luscious fruits; others gave flowers. Each one of them had been planted by the sage and watered by him with his own hands. Girdling the giant trunk of the banyan he had built a square platform and from each side of it a path took off, flanked by rows of trees. At the four corners of the hermitage were four wells. Benches of hewn stone stood near them, and picturesque shrubbery.

The sage knew the history of each one of these trees, shrubs and creepers. The flowers and fruits were for all the ashrama inmates and residents of surrounding villages. Indeed, whoever took the trouble of wending his way to the ashrama could claim his share of them.

The ashrama had a few milch cows. Grateful villagers often led their cows to the ashrama to do a term, each mother with her calf. And if the milk began to run dry they took them away. This was the way they expressed their gratitude to the maharshi for the favours they received.

As the declining years deepened, more visitors came to see the sage. Some questioned him or sought to engage him in argument. He had but one answer to them all: "Start from where you are and what you know. Think out for your self and the truth will show itself to you."

His consecration to silence exasperated many. "He did not study the shastras while young; and his silence is just a ruse to hide his ignorance," they scoffed. But those who had seen his crystal-pure conduct, his spontaneous affinity with Nature's creatures and his unending dedication said: "Whatever his

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grounding in the shastras, he has learnt life's lessons." And the Rishi's nephew added: "Keen is my uncle's intellect, and astounding his memory. He has no need to hear an argument twice; and what is there in the philosophies that he does not know? My father used to tell us that his brother had exchanged the way of study for the way of labour only because precept is so tiresome."

The sage turned ninety, ninety-one and ninety-nine. He announced each passing year to people among whom there was none his own age. But he continued to labour in his own hermitage even as in his younger days he had laboured in the ashrama of his brother and then of his brother's son. Full of years, he was not old; or might be old but his strength was intact; even his strength might have declined but his spirit was unyielding.

One day, when the young Kulapati was on a visit, the sage told him: "My son, you will not see me long. I shall go to my elders."

The Kulapati heard it with a wrench. "Uncle, why must you say so?"

"My father bade me live a hundred years in the world's service. It has been both an order and benediction all these years. Hundred turned, I shall have no reason to be here."

"Is the day near?"

"Yes, the full-moon day of the coming Chaitra."

"Will you leave us in so short a time?" The Kulapati broke down. He embraced the sage and rested his head on his bosom with tears in his eyes.

The sage ran his fingers on the nephew's forehead, kissed him on the cheek and said: "It is the body which ceases. I shall be with you mingled with the elders. A Kulapati and weeping! You who discourse on the nature of the atman, should you not know in life what you preach in words?"

The young Kulapati bridled his grief; he rose and prostrated himself at the sage's feet. "Never have you claimed a disciple. But you must make an exception and accept me as one. That will be my redemption," he pleaded.



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The maharshi said: "He who recognises somebody else as an elder and bows before him is already redeemed. You need have no worry. You are carrying on the dharma of elders; carry it on and redemption will be yours."

"Is it not for me to follow the path that you tread?"

"Those who find the doubt I found should follow the path that I tread."

"What is that doubt?"

"It is not to be revealed to those who have not found it. The duty of a rishi is to help contemplation, not to sow doubt."

"But you have not taught us any of this? Your course is not an inheritance from the past, but should it not at least be continued?"

"Quite a few sages have comprehended Reality. They have all described what they have seen and have earned the same of seers. Enough truth has been revealed already; let it be translated into practice. There is nothing new that I need expound."

"Your way has been distinctive. Should you not acquaint us with the key to it?"

"Of what avail is telling? If this way appears good, it might be followed."

"You must say at least that."

"Whosoever feels like saying so, let him say it."

The young Kulapati did not prolong the colloquy. "I feel I have not served you as I should have. In the month or so that remains, permit me to come to you often. Lead me by the hand," he said.

"Very well," the sage said, after a moment's reflection.

"On the last day I should be near you. Permit me."

The sage again thought over it and said: "So be it."

A couple of days later the Kulapati implored the sage: "If people who come to see you on the full-moon day of Chaitra ask you questions, you must reveal to them as much as you would."

The sage thought again and said, "So be it."

A month passed by. The full-moon day of Chaitra arrived;

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and people came from far and near to see the sage.

The sage rose early, completed his morning tasks and sat at the foot of the jasmine creeper in front of his hut, gently leveling the clods around its roots.

A couple of early visitors bowed to him. "Must you do this yourself?" they asked.

The sage replied, "Yes. This is my work. As a mother looks after her child I must tend my plants with my own hands."

"Do they not say that it is wrong to be immersed in samsara thus, and that attachment is an impediment to salvation?"

"Attachment is wrong; affection is not. Love is the path for the blessed state and there is no other."

"Rest at least today. We shall do your tasks."

"No, this work is no task."

"But your hands get soiled."

"Only the hands get soiled. Life is not tainted by Karma."

Others came. The sage sat beneath the great tree and gazed at the tender sun. A heifer from the ashrama came to him. He fed her with tender blades of grass.

The newcomers bowed to him and sat down. One of them queried: "For ages men have thought about God and asked the question whether there is a God. And the question remains unanswered. The sage must enlighten us."

"Brothers, all creation, animate and inanimate, is Ishwara, and nothing else. Even as the light of the sun envelops the outer world, the light of Ishwara permeates the inner and the outer. Ask not: 'Is there a God?' Ask yourselves, 'Is there anything?' If the answer is yes, then all that exists is God."

"Then all we see is God?"

"Without doubt. All that we see here, there, within and without, all is God."

"If everything is God, is it not difficult to deal with God?"

"There is no cause for difficulty. Convince yourselves that all that is, is Ishwara. Then your dealings become simple. There will be no conflict. Everything will be harmony and you will accept gladly what Ishwara vouchsafes and you will not covet what is

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not yours."

More people came and sat around the sage. "Why do men err?" they asked.

"Because they do not know that all the world is one life. He who realises that all is one will not sin against others for that will be sinning against himself. All evil-doing is self-destruction."

"Is all error born of ignorance, then? Do we not knowingly err?"

"That means there is something wrong in the sum of that knowledge."

"If we do wrong from wrong knowledge, does that also merit punishment?"

"Wrong-doing is its own punishment for, instead of light, darkness grows in the spirit. We live rightly and ascend to the realm of light; we live wrongly and descend to the depths of darkness."

Arrived an inquirer. "I seek to know the nature of Brahman," he said.

The sage put him a few questions and told him later: "You are qualified to know this truth. Seek and learn. The elders said, '*Sarvam khalu idam Brahman*', and that is the imperishable truth. The Brahman is incomprehensible to each one of the constituent particles. To explain Brahman would be to reconcile the irreconcilable attributes; to include mutually exclusive states. It is static, it is dynamic; it is near, yet far; it is inside everything, yet beyond everything. It stays where it is; but flies faster than the mind can grasp. The Gods cannot reach it. It is first born; it is the beginning. The rock that rolls off the hill-top is bound to rest on the earth, howsoever far it may roll. And the earth which stood where it stood while the rock travelled is still there where it came to rest. The principle of Brahman implies movement in the moving things when they begin to move. All the while, it is with them, itself unmoved. And when the movement ceases and the goal is reached, it is ready to take hold of it and raise it up."

Came more people. One of them asked: "We are told that

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you hold mercy as the cardinal dharma. How can we be kind to the wicked?"

The maharshi made reply: "Our atman pervades all. Know this and practise this. Then even evil evokes pity, not disgust. If the feet become muddy, you wash off the mud, but do not chastise your feet. The reason is your awareness that you and your feet are one. If this sense of identity is extended to all life, it teaches you tolerance."

"If we think that all is self might we not grow selfish and heed not the good of others?"

"Yes, indeed, if it remains only a matter of argument, but not when it becomes living experience. The hand is not pleased to pinch the leg, nor will the mouth bite the fingers. If the leg is hurt the hand caresses it; if the fingers are burnt, the mouth blows cool air on them. The One is not word of mouth; the One is living principle. For a life thus led, there is no attachment and no sorrow."

"All is God; I am God: Yet I suffer. Wherefore is it thus?"

"Because 'I am God' remains a string of words and has not become experience. He who realises the Brahman in the Self knows the Self to be immaculate. It has no body; it suffers not; it has no limb that can ache. It is indeed a pure principle that is beyond the reach of pain."

The sage was silent for a moment and resumed:

"Brahman will bestow ineffable grace for eternal aeons on the soul which realises this."

It was approaching midday. The Kulapati stopped the inflow of visitors to give the venerable man some rest. The sage washed his hand and feet. He ate some soaked gram and sipped a cup of milk. He took a handful of gram, divided it into four parts, placed the tiny heaps to the four directions and stretched himself on the stone bench. In no time four squirrels scampered in and ate up the grain. With a beaming countenance the sage watched them eat.

The sun began going down. The maharshi moved a little to the west, and gazing on the descending sun, fell into joyful



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meditation.

Some people from the far side of the Ganga came to him, fording the river.

They were days of intense debate about knowledge and ignorance, attachment and renunciation, here and hereafter. People took sides, lauding one view and belittling another. Each side had its own brilliant exponents, and the arguments were endless.

"Which of the two is important—the supreme knowledge that leads to salvation or worldly learning that leads to material happiness?" questioned a newcomer. "Is there salvation for a worldly man, or is it attainable only through renunciation?"

The maharshi was silent for a few minutes. Then he said: "He who denies the world in the name of knowledge and ignorance ends in darkness. He who denies knowledge and is engrossed in the world meets a similar fate. Live the life here and to live it well master worldly learning in earnest. Lead yourself to the life hereafter by realising the higher knowledge. Live in this world and practise detachment. Then the world will not bind you and salvation will not elude you. We deem as contradictory what are really complementary and we feel lost. There is no need to feel helpless. Great were the gurus who taught us the Truth. They had attained bliss, and thus was their message."

The voice of the sage was mellow. His strength was perhaps ebbing. His ears did not seem to catch the questions of one or two persons.

The sun, robed in resplendent hues, went down to the meeting line of earth and sky. A cool evening breeze blew. The birds in the trees twittered in unselfconscious happiness. Half recollecting his last words and half to himself, the sage said: "The golden sun reveals the earth and the sky recedes. It is the threshold that makes a house a home distinct from the open. He who crosses the threshold of life has nothing to lose and everything to gain. This life is day; in it I find half the truth. I cross the threshold of evening and inherit the splendour of the sky." He paused and then prayed: "Surya, my king, lift the curtain of light; I seek to see truth and let truth be seen." He folded his

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hands in salutation.

Ten minutes later, the sage said in a pure and clear voice:

*pushannakarsha yamasūryapṛajāpatya vyūha rashmīn samāha  
tejo yatte rāgam kalyāṇatāmam tatte paryāmi. . .*

The young Kulapati came and sat close to where the sage lay. Two tear-drops defied his will and coursed down his cheeks. The sage saw them. He placed his hands in the Kulapati's and said:

*yaḥ asau asau puruṣaḥ saḥ aham asmi.*

By gesture, he asked to be moved to the slab on the east. Gently, very gently, the Kulapati and four others lifted him and laid him down so that he rested on his right and faced the east.

All eyes were bedewed. The sage consoled them.

*vāyuranīlamamṛitamathedam bhāṣmāntam sarīram.*

"Om," he chanted. "Remember the creed and the deed; think of the ideal and the achievement," the maharshi repeated to himself.

The Kulapati bent over him and asked: "What is the creed?"

"That all land should become a heavenly garden, as this one. Likewise the soul within should blossom and bear fruit."

A moment later the sage called the Kulapati and bade him bring his sacrificial fire and place it near him.

With tears in his eyes the Kulapati obeyed.

The sun had sunk. On the eastern horizon, the pale disc of the full moon gained in glow. The orb of fire that sank a while ago in the west seemed to have risen in the east as a ball of butter.

The sage saluted the holy fire and chanted a hymn of the Vedic rishis:

*agne naya supathā rāye asmān visvāni deva vāyunaṇi vidvān  
yuyodhyasmai juhurānameno bhūyishṭām te nama uktim vidhema.*

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He kept his eyes closed a long while after chanting the hymn. The Kulapati touched his feet.

The sage opened his eyes again. He saw the Kulapati, saw the irradiant moon, saw the sky studded with stars.

"*Yatte rūpam kalyāṇamam tatte paśyāmi*," he repeated to himself several times and closed his eyes.

The eyes did not open again. By midnight the breathing ceased. Before dawn the body had grown cold.

Those who were witness to the event realised that he truly was a great knower who had shed his life at the hour appointed by himself. Many regretted that so illustrious a maharshi had left no Upanishad of his own. Those who disapproved of his mode of life mocked : "All he could teach was the rearing of cows. What Upanishad could he have composed ?"

But a wise one among those who were with the sage on his last day said : "We shall put together all the words the maharshi uttered on the last day and propagate it as his Upanishad."

"I had anticipated and had entreated the maharshi to answer whatever question we asked of him the final day," the Kulapati said.

Long back someone had asked the maharshi if he should not have an Upanishad of his own. He had pointed to his garden and said, "This is my Upanishad."

On another occasion he had remarked: "Wherefore an Upanishad of mine or yours? Do we not have the Isha Upanishad?"

"Men's Upanishads are words, God's Upanishad is the world," he had said another time.

All this came to light. The wise realised that he was a matchless Karmayogi. Dutifully they approached the Kulapati and made over to him all they had heard. The Kulapati and others wove these lines together into the stanzas of Isha Upanishad.

In those words some of the light that the great Vamadeva Dwaipayana Aruneya lit by his way of life is still illumining men's lives.

'Mantrodaya'

*Tr. from Kannada by H. Y. SHARADA PRASAD*